

Zion

Reading from the Psalms: Psalm 48

Reading from the Gospels: Mark 14:58

Reading from the Epistles: Hebrews 11:10

Not long after we to learn to burp, giggle, and move, we start building things with blocks, boxes, blankets, and broomsticks. A fort or a castle with walls made of grandma's quilt and your Batman bedspread; its ramparts fashioned from kitchen chairs and sofa cushions. Built to repel the threat of marauding foes, you feel safe behind those walls.

Similarly, the approach of twilight last night sent many a nervous dog in search of a table or a bed to hide under, as though a thin layer of wood or mattress would protect them from the fourth's rising fever of pyrotechnic madness. The rockets red glare gave proof through the night that the dog was still scared.

That struttin' theologian Mick Jagger screams the circumstance that has sent us to the hardware store since the dawn of civilization.

Oh, a storm is threat'ning

My very life today

If I don't get some shelter

Oh yeah, I'm gonna fade away (*Gimme Shelter*, The Rolling Stones)

To this day, we find everyone from the precocious preschooler to the paranoid survivalist to the mad tyrant to the civilized nation-state trying to make the word impregnable more than a myth.

430 ft. above sea level, atop a crag known as Castle Rock, sits the iconic Edinburgh Castle, standing sentry over the old city Edinburgh, Scotland. Castle Rock, inhabited as early as the 2nd Century, has had a castle riding its crest since at least the 12th Century. Edinburgh Castle dominates the landscape, conveying an intimidating and impregnable presence (conveying, mind you, not possessing).

In 1296, Edward I of England captured the castle, wresting control from the Scots. However, on March 14th, 1314, William Francis, a member of the garrison of legendary Robert the Bruce, had once lived in the castle and remembered a secret pathway down the rocks beneath the Argyle Battery that allowed him to sneak out to see his girlfriend. So, he led of group of Robert the Bruce's men up that north face route on Castle Rock, arriving at a spot where the wall of the castle could be scaled, and the Scots successfully overtook the castle.

By the reign of Edward III, England had control once again. However, in 1341, a Scottish party led by William Douglas "disguised

themselves as merchants from the port city of [Leith](#) bringing supplies to the garrison. Driving a cart into the entrance, they halted it there to prevent the gates from closing. A larger force hidden nearby rushed to join them and the castle was retaken.” (Historic-Scotland.org and Wikipedia)

There is a difference between appearing impregnable and being impregnable. We seem born to the myth that we can protect ourselves from all threats. We’re trading in our *Twinkies* for kale, declaring war on wrinkles, and swallowing little blue pills, assuming we can stay forever young. We’re seduced by the advertiser’s outrageous guarantees, fooled into thinking *Built to last* is a complete sentence. We’re conned into believing the solution to violence can be purchased at the gun store. We’re like the guy that lines the corner of his well-manicured lawn with stones. That’s not protection. It’s an invitation. We’re like the crazy uncle forwarding all those paranoid conspiracy emails informing us of the latest threat to our health and safety.

Build a wall. Install a camera. Clothe the kids in bubble wrap. Buy a gun. In pursuing the myth of security and impregnability we are prone to take the big leap from prudence to paranoia.

Impregnable. Invulnerable. Indestructible. Invincible. You'll find these words in the dictionary, though they are better suited for fairytales because despite our best efforts, we remain a limited, finite, vulnerable people in a limited, finite, vulnerable world. It is the very nature of creation, the distinction between the Creator and the created. So, where do you find security? Where is your sure defense?

1 “Great is the Lord [says the Psalmist] and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain, **2** beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. **3** Within its citadels God has shown himself a sure defense.”

The Psalmist here lyricizes the walled city of Jerusalem as Zion, the holy mountain of God, the center, sanctuary, and citadel representing God's reign over all the earth. The city, its walls, its temple are characterized as an imposing and impregnable fortress. The Psalmist imagines would be conquering kings taking flight once they see God's stronghold atop Mt. Zion: “They were astounded; they were in panic, they took to flight; **6** trembling took hold of them there, pains as of a woman in labor, **7** as when an east wind shatters the ships of Tarshish.”

The Psalmist encourages Israel to find its peace, its sense of security, its confidence and hope in the towering fortress of Zion. “Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, **13** consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation **14** that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever.”

One problem though, Jerusalem wasn’t impregnable, invulnerable, indestructible. Even David knew that, for he himself had taken Jerusalem from the Jebusites by climbing up a water tunnel with his men and opening the gate from the inside, much like William Francis guiding the Scots up his girlfriend route to overtake Edinburgh Castle.

The ramparts of Jerusalem would fall; Solomon’s temple destroyed by the Babylonians and Herod’s temple razed to the ground by the Romans. The prophet Jeremiah was very clear about the fragility of Zion and its temple, that sacred place they held so dear. He warned Israel, “Do not trust in these deceptive words: “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord ... Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. **9** Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, **10** and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name,

and say, "We are safe! ... Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh." In case you didn't know it, Shiloh didn't fare very well. And sure enough, the temple, the walls, the ramparts of Zion fell.

So, was the hope, the confidence, the surety of the psalmist misplaced? Absolutely not. For Jeremiah understood and later Jesus and Paul after him would understand, more clearly what the Psalmist conveyed. The strength of Zion, the hope of Jerusalem, our security, our salvation are not found in stone and mortar. Rather, now as then, our strength, our hope, our security, our salvation are found in the Lord who made heaven and earth. The walls of Zion were, as the walls this sanctuary are, lovely, inspiring, even sacred, but they were and are set in place solely to point us beyond, giving us some admittedly limited impression of something far more transcendent and glorious. Open now Thy gates of beauty, Zion, let me enter there ...

Where we find Thee and adore Thee,
 There a heaven on earth must be.
 To my heart, oh, enter Thou,
 Let it be Thy temple now! (*Open Now Thy Gates of Beauty*, Benjamin Schmolck)

The first time we traveled to New York, we made the obligatory journey down to Battery Park to see the Statue of Liberty. We were too cheap to take the tour, so we paid our quarter and rode by it at a distance on the Staten Island Ferry. And I remember thinking at the time, “I thought it would be bigger.” I know that’s blasphemy, but I had grown up hearing constant references to the lady in the harbor, sweeping camera shots and mellifluous voices, “Bring me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses...” It always loomed so large in my mind. Frank Sinatra sang about it. Filmmakers made it seem indestructible. It could be buried in ice but the torch still rose intact. In the *Planet of the Apes* she’s washed up on the beach, yet still her flame rides high.

So, I’m not sure what I was expecting, but it just seemed smaller than I imagined, certainly no less vulnerable to the elements and decay as any other structure. However, as orators and composers and poets have implied through the years, it is not the statue that looms large, but the liberty it represents.

Similarly, if you travel to Jerusalem today, you will find but a small segment of a wall to the temple mount. Yet that fragment remains a sacred

space, not because the ancient stones are sacred, but because the stones point the pilgrims who trek there to the sacred.

That's what Jesus was trying to convey to the righteously indignant guardians of the temple when they hear him say, "'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.' " The stones were vulnerable, but the love to which they point is invulnerable. The same can be said of our stained glass and even the Welch's juice and Wonderbread that bear such sacred meaning for us.

The finite, the vulnerable, the fragile, the perishable are given meaning as they point us toward the imperishable love of God. Paul sought to convey the same thing, "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." Similarly, it is what the author of Hebrews gleaned from the witness of Abraham, "For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Now, I want us to put on our thinking caps because I want us to wrestle with a complex but illuminating observation offered by one of the great minds of the 20th Century. Then, if you have questions you can ask Bill Dysard because he actually studied under the guy.

Theologian Paul Tillich observed that, “The creative man, in all realms of life, is like a child, who dares to inquire beyond the limits of conventional answers. He discovers the fragmentary character of all these answers, a character darkly and subconsciously felt by all men. He may destroy, by means of one fundamental question, a whole, well-organized system of life and society, of ethics and religion. He may show that what people believed to be a whole is nothing but a fragment of a fragment. He may shake the certainty on which centuries lived, by unearthing a riddle or an enigma in its very foundation. The misery of man lies in the fragmentary character of his life and knowledge; the greatness of man lies in his ability to know that his being is fragmentary and enigmatic. For man is able to be puzzled and to ask, to go beyond the fragments, seeking the perfect ... He alone knows that there is something beyond vanity and decay, beyond riddles and enigmas.”

Tillich then explains this notion as it is revealed in the life of the apostle Paul. “Man is a fragment and a riddle to himself. The more he experiences and knows that fact, the more he is really man. Paul experienced the breakdown of a system of life and thought which he believed to be a whole, a perfect truth without riddle or gaps. He then found himself buried under the pieces of his knowledge and his morals. But Paul never tried again

to build up a new, comfortable house out of the pieces. He dwelt with the pieces. He realized always that fragments remain fragments, even if one attempts to reorganize them. The unity to which they belong lies beyond them; it is grasped through hope, but not face to face.

How could Paul endure life, as it lay in fragments? He endured it because the fragments bore a new meaning to him. The pictures in the mirror pointed to something new for him: they anticipated the perfect, the reality of love. Through the pieces of his knowledge and morality, love appeared to him. And the power of love transformed the tormenting riddles into symbols of truth, the tragic fragments into symbols of the whole.” (Paul Tillich, *Shaking the Foundations*)

How did Paul sum it up? “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.”

You see, just as the Israelites looked to Zion for hope, so too, we gather in this lovely, yet limited, and transitory space – a fragment if you will. Yet, we gather, understanding that the role of the fragment is to point us to the whole, the unflinching, indestructible, unassailable love of God.

That’s what the church arsonists don’t understand. You may burn it down, but nothing will destroy the body of Christ. This place is sacred, not

in and of itself, but because it points us beyond the fragmentary to the complete, the broken to the whole.

It is interesting to note, though, that the one structure in the Castle complex atop Edinburgh's Castle Rock that has survived the sieges and the elements of 900 years is the chapel. Yet, were those stones to collapse tomorrow, the body of Christ, the church, the walls of Zion will still stand strong. Amen.